

To Guatemalan Landowner, the Enemy is Communism

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By JUAN M. VASQUEZ, *Times Staff Writer*

GUATEMALA CITY—To hear Roberto Alejos talk in his salty English, to scan the magazine titles on the bookshelf of his spacious office—*Fortune*, the *Harvard Business Review*—he might be an American businessman. A very conservative businessman.

"The present problem with the United States Congress," he observes with a smile as he offers a cup of steaming Guatemalan coffee, "is what you call liberals. We call them communists."

Communism. It is a menace that Alejos, a native Guatemalan, has been fighting for at least 30 of his 62 years, beginning with the active support he offered to the coup that overthrew the elected leftist government of Col. Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in 1954.

Helping Hand to CIA

Arbenz's downfall was engineered by the Eisenhower Administration through the CIA, and Alejos says he is proud to have had a small role in that event, which he declined to specify. It was not to be the last time he gave a helping hand to the CIA.

"The CIA helped to bring the coup about, to culminate it," Alejos recalled last week in an interview in his sixth-floor office in downtown Guatemala City, "but the makings were there already. The entire country was behind the movement to oust Arbenz."

Such a view may not square with other recollections of what happened in Guatemala in 1954, but it is consistent with the sentiments of wealthy landowners, among whom Alejos has long been a leading member.

Like most wealthy Central American businessmen, Alejos is surrounded by his own security guards wherever he goes. But the presence of an armed, fatigue-clad military policeman patrolling the corridor outside is a clear signal that this is no ordinary businessman's office.

The special vigil is explained by Alejos' membership in the Order of the Knights of Malta, an order of the Roman Catholic Church composed of distinguished laymen and clergymen whose national offices around the world have quasi-diplomatic status.

His us-versus-them social and political attitudes find echo among many Central Americans of privileged position. For decades, Alejos has been an outspoken defender and valued member of this resistant, endangered minority.

The Alejos family has been involved in agriculture in Guatemala for at least a century. As is true of most other leading families in Central America, land is the original source of the wealth, particularly coffee plantations.

The determination by the haves to keep this land away from the have-nots—to retain what their forefathers accumulated and bequeathed to them—is in some essential aspects what the turmoil in Central America is

all about.

In 1953, some of the Alejos land was expropriated by the Arbenz government as part of a nascent land-reform program. Today, more than 30 years later, the mention of land reform still sparks a flash of anger from Alejos.

"*Babosadas*," (stupidities), he said. "Agrarian reform can succeed only within the minds of those stupid liberals in the U.S. Congress."

After 1954, Alejos became more involved in politics. He was the first president of the country's association of coffee growers and on the board of the General Association of Agricultural Producers.

Bay of Pigs Role

In 1959, his concern over communism mounted again when Fidel Castro took over in Cuba and reportedly tried to help guerrillas in Guatemala. So, when the CIA needed a place to train Cuban exiles who would participate in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, Alejos was only too happy to offer his *finca* (estate), *Helvetia*.

"I thought, well, if Castro can try to screw us up, we can try to screw him up, too," Alejos recalled with a smile of satisfaction. The Bay of Pigs operation failed, but Alejos came out of it more closely identified with the CIA than ever.

Armed with plenty of money, and believing he had the support of the United States, Alejos ran for president in 1963 in what he proudly called a U.S.-style, television-and-radio campaign. "We ran a campaign the same way you sell Coca-Cola," Alejos contended, "and we did it with our own funds."

But the military intervened during the campaign, and Col. Enrique Peralta took over. Peralta and his associates believed that Alejos was plotting against them. "I was told, 'Either you go or else,'" he recalled. "I went." Alejos took up residence in Florida, where he was to remain, except for a brief sojourn in Europe, until 1966.

The episode demonstrated the importance that the military had assumed in Guatemala as an independent political institution. In neighboring El Salvador, the upper classes and the military have easily worked together—with the army customarily in a subservient role. In Guatemala, there have been occasional clashes of style and personality between the rich and the military, suggesting that the army has developed into an equal and demanding partner in the search for wealth and power.

Kidnaped for Ransom

Back in Guatemala in 1971, Alejos suffered a fate that many wealthy Central Americans would meet in the 1970s: he was kidnaped, though he is not sure by whom.

"That's the \$64 question," he grinned. "Who did it?" Alejos was held for ransom for five months in a dungeon he describes as a "small hole" and came out suffering from emphysema.

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